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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1054  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0677  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 3726  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 001827

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: TASHKENT "KREMLINOLOGY": UZBEK OFFICIAL MEDIA SHOW  
TROUBLED, HAGGARD KARIMOV

Classified By: POLOFF STEVEN PROHASKA FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Uzbekistan's official media has shown a very troubled, aged President Karimov at the October summits of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), CIS, and EURASEC in Dushanbe. This differs dramatically from previous coverage, which has generally shown an upbeat, more youthful president. We hesitate to draw any definitive conclusions at this point, but such images in the state-run media could suggest GOU dissatisfaction with Russian and Chinese-led regional fora, health problems, efforts to undermine Karimov, or an attempt to identify potential regime threats. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Official coverage in Uzbekistan's most influential, state-controlled newspapers--Pravda Vostoka and Narodnoye Slovo--this October has shown relatively large photographs of an uncomfortable, upset-looking Karimov at the CSTO, CIS, and EURASEC summits in Dushanbe. The photos show a grim expression on his face, clearly visible lines and wrinkles under his eyes, and scarring on his cheeks and chin.

¶3. (SBU) These depictions contrast sharply with a body of photographs from these newspapers over the past seven months. With few exceptions, these have shown a much more upbeat, energetic president and tended to show smaller photos that minimized aging. Previous official media coverage of Karimov's meetings with senior foreign government officials in Uzbekistan has typically shown him shaking hands enthusiastically or leaning forward intently at a desk with a small smile on his face. Other photos of him at a variety of functions have shown him sharing a laugh with others, gesturing dramatically or thoughtfully, and in one case lifting an Uzbek world champion boxer off the ground in a bear hug.

¶4. (C) According to an Embassy public affairs FSN, recent Uzbek television coverage of the Dushanbe summits showed a much more depressed-looking Karimov than has been the case in the past. The FSN noted specifically that official news channels such as First Channel and Yoshlar portrayed Karimov

this way. Official television and newspaper coverage of Karimov's visit to Turkmenistan on October 18-19, however, showed Karimov looking better. Several FSNs described him as appearing confident and warmer than he had been in Dushanbe. Pictures of him in Pravda Vostoka and Narodnoye Slovo showed small photos of him grinning next to President Berdimuhamedov.

COMMENT

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15. (C) While we cannot draw definitive conclusions from the media portrayals at Dushanbe, the unflattering depictions from earlier this month raise some interesting possibilities. The Uzbekistan Information Agency has traditionally worked closely with the presidential staff to disseminate officially sanctioned news. The photos could be a subtle condemnation of selected Russian and Chinese-led regional summits that Karimov has attended (an August 17 issue of Narodnoye Slovo showed a small photo of an anxious Karimov at the Bishkek summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and a signal that Karimov wants to move away from them. If true, Karimov may be using the photos as a relatively inoffensive way to send a signal because senior officials in the Uzbek government--such as National Security Council Chairman Atayev and Deputy Foreign Minister Tukhtabayev--have close ties to Russia. Embassy contacts have indicated to us in recent months that Karimov is unhappy with how he is being treated in the Russian-led CSTO and the SCO, and it has been rumored that during his July visit to Tashkent, Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov suggested that Karimov step down (Karimov reportedly rejected this suggestion).

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16. (C) Karimov's appearance in the media covering the Dushanbe summits could instead reflect an effort to show poor health; Karimov has long been rumored to be suffering from health problems. His condition could have been worsened by having to sit through long meetings away from home in which heads of state with whom he does not get along were participating. Other elements within the government--perhaps the National Security Service, which is represented in the Uzbekistan Information Agency--may have tried to undermine Karimov in the runup to the presidential election by showing a weaker side of him publicly. Alternatively, the GOU may be using an old Hun strategy which advocated giving the appearance of weakness in order to draw out suspected enemies, who would then be crushed. While we do not yet have enough information at this point to draw a conclusion, these hypotheses suggest some possible rationales for the negative portrayal of Karimov in the media. We will continue to keep our eyes and ears open for clues that could suggest which, if any, of these is most likely to be true.

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